

GOD'S PEOPLE SAID, "NOT FAIR!!!"
September 21, 2014
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Text: Exodus 16:1-5 and Matthew 20:1-16

SCRIPTURE

Exodus 16:2-15 (NIV)

²In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. ³The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions."

⁵On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days." ⁶So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "In the evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of Egypt, ⁷and in the morning you will see the glory of the LORD, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?" ⁸Moses also said, "You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD." ⁹Then Moses told Aaron, "Say to the entire Israelite community, 'Come before the LORD, for he has heard your grumbling.'" ¹⁰While Aaron was speaking to the whole Israelite community, they looked toward the desert, and there was the glory of the LORD appearing in the cloud. ¹¹The LORD said to Moses, ¹²"I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Tell them, 'At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God.'" ¹³That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat."

Matthew 20:1-16 The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (NIV)

²⁰"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. ²He agreed to pay them a denarius^[a] for the day and sent them into his vineyard.

³"About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. ⁴He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' ⁵So they went.

"He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. ⁶About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' ⁷"'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' ⁸"When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' ⁹"The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. ¹⁰So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. ¹¹When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ¹²"These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

¹³"But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?'

¹⁴Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. ¹⁵Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

The cry of “not fair” can be heard wherever children gather; playgrounds, classrooms, homes, malls, at parties, family gatherings, sports events there will be some infraction to fairness and the cry goes up. She ate the last cookie, not fair; it was my turn to use the computer, not fair; she got to go to two sleepovers, not fair, my friends can all go to the mall, not fair and my personal favorite, “it’s not fair; Susan got to drive alone the day she got her license, I didn’t.” We are all born with an innate sense of fairness which is a good thing because fairness is after all the foundation of justice and equality.

The quest for fairness is timeless, beginning in the Garden of Eden when Adam grumbled that it wasn’t fair of God to blame him for the first couple’s disobedience; it was Eve’s fault. Throughout the Old Testament we hear humanities grumbling and complaining to their leaders and ultimately to God about the unfairness of their situation. In today’s passage from Exodus, you heard the moaning and groaning from the Israelites as they made their way through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Moses had led them out of bondage in Egypt into a desolate place where water and food were scarce. The Israelites are hungry and plead with Moses for food and God provides quails in the evening and manna every morning. This griping is not an isolated incident, in the previous passage the Israelites complained about the bitter water and God made it sweet. And it’s not long before they complain again of thirst and God provides water from the rock.

It seems like the Israelites are a little slow to understand God’s compassionate response to their grumbling. I’m not sure I would have been so charitable toward this ungrateful bunch of whiners. But to be fair, it was a huge learning curve for the former captives to trust that God would lead them to freedom. They were testing their relationship to see if God would be faithful to his promises and God was testing Israel’s obedience to his instructions for gathering food. And time and time again God demonstrated great love and compassion for those chosen ones.

As I prepared for this sermon it seemed to me that there were connections between the grumbling in the Exodus reading and the grumbling of the workers in the vineyard. In both cases the people were complaining about unfairness; the Israelites grumbled about the unfairness of being led by God through a land where food was scarce. In Matthew the workers who spent 12 hours in the vineyard griped about the fairness of paying each worker for a full day even though some worked only one hour.

First, let’s look at these men and it was men who went looking for work each day to feed their families. They went early in the morning to the marketplace so they would be available if anyone needed a day laborer. (Not unusual even today for the unemployed to gather in places where there is a chance they can find work.) These men stand around waiting and hoping that someone shows up needing workers. Surprisingly it’s the owner of the vineyard who comes to the marketplace; usually he would send a manager to hire the help. He promises a fair wage for a day’s work and who do you suppose is chosen first; the young, strong, and healthy men. When more help is needed the owner returns for more workers until it’s an hour before quitting time and who do you suppose is left in the marketplace. Right, it’s the old, worn out; unhealthy men who still have families to feed. Imagine how grateful they are to have a chance to take home something so they can buy food.

At the end of a long hot day in the vineyard, the owner tells his manager to pay the workers beginning with the ones hired last. They line up to receive their pay; when the manager hands them a full a day’s wage they must have thought it was a mistake. When the first get to the head of the line and realize that they too have been given a day’s wage; that’s when the complaining starts. What is this? I worked 12 long hours and those men

over there only worked an hour. Not Fair! We can relate to those who worked a whole day and received the same compensation as those late comers. I'm sure we would agree, they expected and deserved a bonus. After all equal pay for equal work is a concept we understand and support. You can almost hear them say, "How dare you treat us this way?"

The response of the owner is to simply say, what I did is not wrong. You received exactly what I promised, a fair day's wage. It is my right to use my money in a way I see fit. So, I decided to be generous and give to each worker a day's wage. Do you have a problem with my generosity? They did; of course, it just wasn't fair that everyone received the same wage no matter how long they worked. And we have been there, right; with the words "Not Fair" on our lips.

Now, let's remind ourselves of how this parable began; the kingdom of God is like a landowner who... Those words are a clue we have heard them before and we know Jesus is going to describe how life will be lived in God's kingdom or as we have been saying, the beloved community. Last week Pastor Beth used the one about forgiveness and what it looks like in God's kingdom. And there are other kingdom parables in Matthew; the lost son, the lost coin, the mustard seed; each one is told to open us up to the new thing God is doing among us. These parables describe God's desire to shape a community where all are welcomed and invited to participate as one family of God. This is both a present and future reality – it is present where God's people live faithfully – and yet is not complete among us because we are not yet the people God desires and our world is still far from the place God intends.

In our world the kind of generosity we see in the landowner is in short supply. We operate with a different standard; we want what's due us, equal pay for equal work and we don't much care about the other. We haven't yet figured out that in God's kingdom there is no other. God's purpose in paying all the workers the same was God's desire to see that everyone could feed their families. To offer less than the "fair wage" to the latecomers would mean their families would go hungry. In the beloved community there is great joy that the hungry are fed.

We are not unlike the Israelites and the vineyard workers when it comes to understanding the extravagant generosity of God. The Israelites did not go hungry as they traveled through the wilderness; God provided meat and bread – enough for each day. Each of the workers took home a fair wage to use for their families well being. It is amazing that God continues to look on us with favor when we are so slow to trust the depth of God's love, forgiveness and generosity.

Desmond Tutu once said, "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more" and "there is nothing we can do to make God love us less". Those are words to live by – God can be trusted, God will never turn away, God will never give up, God will always welcome the sinner home. When the time is right, the world will become as God intends a place where each person is honored and welcomed in ways that allow them to contribute to the well being of the whole. Imagine, if you are able, a world where compassion brings healing to pain and suffering; where peace triumphs over war and violence; where selfishness and greed are redeemed by love and forgiveness. The beloved community will flourish when all people are treated with the justice and compassion of God who makes us one in Jesus Christ.